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The Upside-Down Swan: Suniti Namjoshi

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Abstract

Diasporic, lesbian and transnational, Suniti Namjoshi—within the framework of postcolonial discourse—attempts to construct an ‘alternative universe’ in textuality. In constructing of an alternative political identity, Namjoshi undertakes a comparative approach in selecting subjects for producing a neo-textual universe, and a comparative study of cross-cultural identities remain central to the analysis of Namjoshi’s work. In this paper I argue that it is because of colonial anti-sodomy law, and because of religious and social stigma that the mission of constructing an alternative universe remains operative in Namjoshi’s work. I also suggest that in Namjoshi’s work, feminism, postcolonialism and queer theory merge but her work has been deliberately sidelined by the academia.

I

In 2006 Suniti Namjoshi (b. 1941) published *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*.¹ It included a section on the ‘unsung / untold’ story of Shakespeare’s Sycorax and a section on the ‘new’ life of Protea.² By then, taking textual genesis from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and imitating the fashion of many postcolonial texts,³ in 1984 Namjoshi had published in *From the Bedside Book of Nightmare* a section entitled “Snapshots of Caliban”. “Sycorax”, a continuation of “Snapshots of Caliban”, of rewriting Shakespeare, attempted to reorganise the structure of the “humanist universe”—a project, rather a challenge, she attempted to undertake in *The Jackass and the Lady* in 1980.⁴ Rewriting Shakespeare to challenge the

¹ Henceforth *Sycorax*.

² Protea — a female character in Namjoshi who stands for diversity, courage, change and transformation — has her origin in Greek mythology. Proteus, the prophetic old man of the sea, could change forms according to his wish to avoid sharing his knowledge of the past, present and future. Protea, one among the oldest families of flowers on earth, dating back to 300 million years, was named after Proteus, because it is found in an astounding variety of shapes, sizes, hues and textures to make up more than 1,400 varieties. Protea in Namjoshi’s *Sycorax* is a lady; she engages herself in introspection to reveal her past, present and future life.

³ A discussion on the appropriations of *The Tempest* and a comprehensive note of postcolonial responses can be found in the chapter entitled “Colonial Metaphors” in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan’s *Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

⁴ In *The Jackass and the Lady* Namjoshi writes: “It’s apparent to many women that in a humanist universe, which has become male-centered historically, women are “the other”, together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of the creation. An identification with the rest of creation, possibly with the whole of it, would only be logical; unless, of course, one wished to create a mirror image of the humanist universe, with woman at the centre, accepting the consequences of consigning everything else to ‘the other’” (quoted in

existing structure of the male-centred 'humanist universe' is part of the volumes of writing she has produced. They include rewriting of ancient and canonical fables and stories, and making new ones in the process of defining / identifying the lesbian / feminist 'self' amongst birds, beasts and animals.⁵ Rewriting canonical texts as a third-world lesbian feminist also includes exploring possibilities of multiple dimensions of traditional stories, fables and poems. For instance, the untold story of Sycorax portrayed in *Sycorax*, inclusion of an ageing sparrow as the witness of colonialism, and humanising Protea, a character from Greek mythology as a lady, are some of the instances of reorganising the world. Presently celebrated as a fabulist and a poet, Namjoshi has been constantly producing poetry and fables since the publication of her first collection of poems, *Poems*, in 1967.

Namjoshi's *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables* (1989) and *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) are considered autobiographical and they show her development as a third world lesbian poet. *Conversations of Cow* (1985) and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1991) thematically remain critical of lesbian identity in a heterosexist world. The collections of work celebrating lesbianism are mostly written outside India and Namjoshi justifies the reasons behind such an exercise in the introductory sections of *Because of India*.⁶

This article explores that Namjoshi maps the different facets of lesbian desire and identity within the framework of postcolonial discourse. It analyzes the representation of animal imagery with which she identifies the homosexual self. Further, it highlights in principle the way law, religion and social discourses are presented against sexual identities in Namjoshi's work, and the way she attempts to frame an alternative universe in textuality. It argues it is because of Indian law against homosexuality and social stigma that the mission of constructing an alternative universe remains operative in Namjoshi. Further, it suggests that in Namjoshi's work, feminism, postcolonialism and queer theory merge but her work has been deliberately sidelined by the academia.

Because of India, pp. 28-29). Hence, the rewriting programme is directly related to the attempt of creating a mirror image of the 'humanist universe'. Henceforth, wherever I use the term "humanist universe," it is strictly based on Namjoshi's way of understanding the structure of the universe, which is 'male-centric', 'patrilineal', and chiefly 'heterosexist'.

⁵ *Because of India*, 1989, 28.

⁶ Namjoshi claims that sexual identity is not an Indian cultural phenomenon. She alludes to the nature of Indian familial and societal relationships in the formation of a cultural identity. "In India I was inescapably my grandfather's granddaughter, one member of a particular family located for hundreds of years in a particular region, with a particular place in a particular system" (1989, 14). The concept of identity — lesbian and feminist — is Western in origin. She alludes to the 'openness' of the Western cultural discourse that helped shape her lesbian identity.

II

In “And She Wrote Her Poems,” published in *The Jackass and the Lady*, Namjoshi wrote the following lines which could be attributed to why she declared herself as a lesbian feminist and why she undertook the mission of creating a mirror image of the humanist universe:

And she wrote her poems because muteness
terrified her,
seeing, as she did, in the level lake water
an upside down swan. (1989, p. 31)

The word “and” in the title and in the first line of the poem, and the phrase “upside down swan” have to be read within the context of ‘lesbian feminism’ that Namjoshi invokes in *Because of India*. They project Namjoshi’s career as a lesbian writer of colour in the West. The word “and” is a continuation from a phase of silence that she had to undergo living in India; at her house, she was her grandfather’s granddaughter—bound by strict familial / social relationships. She had to break away from the societal boundaries to have her independent self-realisation. In *Because of India*, she writes: “One aspect of culture shock is that one is not recognised—in both senses of the word. In India I was inescapably my grandfather’s granddaughter, one member of a particular family located for hundreds of years in a particular region, with a particular place in a particular system” (p. 14). Hence, the period of ‘muteness’ is a phase of living in the ‘closet’. The poem takes us from the ‘closet’ to the realm of ‘coming out’ as a lesbian writer of colour in the Western world. Moving beyond erotic secrecy and prevailing silences, the poem moves beyond lesbian self-revelation. Breaking away from patriarchal and patrilineal boundaries, Namjoshi opens up discussions concerning postcolonial sexuality and reveals how difficult it is to have a sexual identity in India. The poem projects the theme of breaking away from the boundaries of home, family and society and coming out of the closet after a period of repression. It is not about literally seeing the upside-down swan and being inspired to make the ‘upside’ ‘down’; if read in context, it is inescapably concerned with ‘coming out’ desires to declare her ‘sexual orientation’.

In Namjoshi, with ‘coming out’ desire comes a variety of texts projecting lesbian love and desire: poems, short stories, fables and short fiction. Most of them reveal how, boldly declaring her sexual orientation, Namjoshi has positioned herself as a third world writer of colour. After an understanding of the male-centric universe, Namjoshi writes in “I Give Her the Rose” about lesbian love and desire:

I give her the rose with unfurled petals.
She smiles
and crosses her legs. (p. 32)

The erotic secrecy is gone. The closeted space is broken. There is no turning back. In other words, the period of silence is over; she has understood “the logic of lesbianism” (p. 14) and has to construct a lesbian identity that is both Indian and postcolonial in textuality rather than keeping her poems superficial with erotic secrecy. With the

publication of *The Jackass and the Lady*, Namjoshi's writing becomes more open towards exploring lesbian love, friendship, passion and sexuality:

I give her the shell with the swollen lip.
 She laughs, I bite
 and nuzzle her breasts.
 I tell her, "Feed me on flowers
 with wide open mouths,"
 and slowly,
 she pulls down my head. (p. 32)

With this Namjoshi translates love and desire into a textual practice that produces lesbian identification. A number of collections follow *The Jackass and the Lady*, which are more concerned about exploring the roots of the Indian homophobic past than the present order of homophobia itself. It is about breaking away from sexual and textual boundaries, often threatening the male-centric societal boundaries. A critique of such cultural encounter is reflected in *Because of India*, which indicates that it is because of the positioning of law, religion and social discourses 'coming out' is hardly possible for closeted women. "In this Kind Country," an extract from *Flesh and Paper*, presents that it is because of the heterosexist society that she had to permanently settle outside India to live the life of a lesbian writer. With 'coming out', the familial and cultural identity categories bestowed upon her as a 'granddaughter' or a 'member' of a great family do not hold much significance anymore; however, the section emblems the heterosexist world which is crucial to our understanding of queer migration. The familial relationship is so prescriptive about heterosexual monogamous marital sex that it is practically impossible to declare one's sexual preference to one's family.

The hidden nature of lesbian love is the basic theme here. That in India or in any Indian language there is no word that depicts lesbianism is the basic concern presented here.⁷ Hence, the body of the lesbian woman is perceived 'alien' and cannot be housed in the Indian context. Thus, metaphorically, it is in the Indian context that Namjoshi's self cannot be named. *Because of India*, the title of this selection of fables and poems, is crucial to the understanding of sexual liberation in Namjoshi's work as well. It is because of India, the homophobic land, that Namjoshi had to permanently settle in the West. It is because of India that she had to move from country to country alienating the lesbian self from her own homeland and because of India she had to compose poems to restructure the society: "Because of India, before and after, / what could we uncover? / the history not for taking: / the family not for joining: / the cause not for naming: / and lover, what could we discover / in any country or poetry? (p. 121). A satirical piece, critical about sexual identity, this section projects an image of India that is familiar to both the Eastern and

⁷ See the introductory sections of Ashwini Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror* (1999) and Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) for a discussion on the available Indian terms on lesbianism. See also *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (1996), where Giti Thadani argues that *sakhi* and *saheli* are words that represent lesbian love, but in modern times these words have been 'normalised' to a significant degree and represent 'harmless' (i.e., non-sexual) female friendship.

Western world. With the smallest social institutions such as the family and home India has started stigmatizing its queer population.

How does Namjoshi arrive at such a conclusion? Why and how does she attempt to create a mirror image of the humanist universe? How and in what ways does Indian past—its culture, religion and social discourses—inescapably hold the root of homophobia? In Namjoshi, an understanding of sexual liberation, however, does not come without a proper understanding of the true nature of the male-centric world itself: “I had known for some time that identity isn’t only a matter of self-definition. It also depends on the identity that other people attribute to one” (p. 84). When she resided in America and Canada, she was exposed to the gay liberation movement. She not only declared herself a ‘lesbian feminist’, she also revised some of her poems in the light of the movement in order not to compromise with the male-centric universe. Consequently, as a coloured lesbian in the West, her own positioning has been thrice away from the mainstream society:

...as a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all the other creatures who have their own identities? ... Today the main components seem to be based on gender, skin colour, and sexual choice, as well as other factors such as nationality and religion, which are more or less important in different places. Any threat to the sense of self causes a violent reaction. (p. 84)

With such realisation, the reorganisation of the universe commences in textuality along with the idea of revising older poems. Namjoshi changed some of the already composed poems in light of the mission she undertook. She writes: “...in the poem about the upside down swan, I boldly turned ‘he’ into ‘she’ even though I had had ‘he’ originally” (p. 27). Some of the poems needed further work to be accommodated with the spirit of the movement; several others were yet to be composed in the light of the mission. Identifying the lesbian self with India still remains crucial even if she permanently settled in the West. It is with the knowledge of the “logic of lesbianism” that Namjoshi attempts her poems for a social change, for a change in the perception of people. She claims that it is with Western education that she could boldly declare herself as a lesbian writer, and it is with the understanding of the ‘non-existent’ status of lesbian women that most of her characters—even birds and animals—are female. Namjoshi writes: “It’s apparent to many women that in a humanist universe, which has been *male-centred historically*, women are “*the other*”, together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of creation” (emphasis added; pp. 28-29). And hence, she creates a space for women characters in textuality, and while laying the foundation of the textual space created, the poems and fables produced during this period celebrate lesbian desire and identity.

In the textual space created, positioning women at the centre came along with placing birds, beasts and animals in the scenario and identifying the ‘lesbian feminist’ self among them. And with this, the centrality of alternative creation continues to find a place in Namjoshi’s writing. “Homage to Circe”, for instance, seems to be an imitation of Pound’s *Cantos*, but identifying the alternative self with the alternative creation remains operative as the dominant theme. And further, “Snapshots of Caliban”, “Sycorax” and

“Protea” centralise such alternative characters and they restructure historicity depicted in main-stream patriarchal works. With an understanding of the real nature of the world comes self-realisation. The difficulty in finding a space for lesbian women in India finds ample encouragement in reorganising the structure of the society in textuality. Fighting back—replacing men with animals and birds—is a process through which Namjoshi undertakes the mission put forward in *The Jackass and the Lady*.

Not only does the “upside down swan” provide equal importance to the poem, the animal imagery depicted in several other texts serves a purpose in creating a space for women in general and lesbian women in particular. In Namjoshi’s literary career, all these aspects hold equal importance in developing literary perspectives in terms of framing an alternative identity category. In creating a lesbian Caliban—a woman representing the third world—Namjoshi invokes an oppositional reading practice against the male-centric literary discourse. In textuality, projecting Caliban as a lesbian woman of colour or altering the image of Miranda as a lesbian woman of the first world holds much significance in the mission of creating the alternative world. All male-centric literatures have to be rewritten; the male-centric universe has to be restructured; and male-centric approach to women’s life has to be broken in the neo-textual space. Namjoshi’s crucial linking of sexuality with colonial encounter, in “Snapshots of Caliban”, is expressed most clearly, in relation to female homosexuality, through the representation of Caliban and Miranda’s physical relationship. Clearly expressed to denote the hidden part of a person’s life, the sexual aspect of lesbianism has come to be associated with linking the bridge between the East and the West in terms of housing homosexuality—not with secrecy but in the form of an identity. The performance of ‘homo-’ and ‘hetero-’ relationship, in relation to postcolonial discourse, is thus subsequently seen as the origin of a literary foundation in Namjoshi’s work that has its meaning beyond the Asian identity. Unlike Shakespeare, thus, Namjoshi portrays Caliban as an educated woman who can speak properly and write lucidly, and she knows what she desires. Namjoshi’s own understanding in creating Caliban is that she is a highly egoistic lady who demands what she desires.

Significantly, the author’s life as a third world woman of colour is depicted in Caliban’s character. The opening poem reads: “Not wrong to have wanted you, / but wrong / should the desire, being thwarted, / turn to rage” (p. 85). When we proceed, we find poems depicting Miranda’s anger, Prospero’s meditation, and Caliban’s ego — her hopes and aspirations — inscribed in her journal. Caliban can speak and write, can understand her ambitions, and she realises that she has been tricked on the island. The first poem opposes the opening of the epic form from the beginning itself because Namjoshi understands that a grand narrative is hardly desirable for the movement undertaken. Opening the narrative to structure the lesbian movement takes a different turn however; it attempts to be the song of “...the bloodier aspects of gay liberation and women’s liberation—things to do with who one loved, how and why it hurt, and what about the family” (p. 83). As a strategy of narrating the ‘bloodier aspect’ of the movement, going against the grand epic narrative is also equally important. Miranda, so far in the closet, would proceed marking words for her homosexual move and thereby she suggests

that her desire has been silenced by Prospero's interference. With this way to diffuse the unsaid desire, Namjoshi puts forward the two sides of cultural understanding of life on homosexuality.

With the narrative of Miranda and Caliban, Namjoshi has perfected a system of writing both to narrate and structure an oppositional form of writing literature, testing the limits of what could be identified as a clear poetic of sexual life and identity. It should be understood that the fairly problematic view of the relationship between Caliban and Miranda, as against Shakespeare's, is to construct a tradition that has to have a literature, history and pattern of life. The radical shift in Miranda's attitude towards Caliban has to have an equally radical manoeuvre. Hence, the poems portray the theme of gaining control over the island by Caliban. Prospero understands the external reality of losing control over the island and its inhabitants, and finally finds solace in his meditation. This active and self-contained poetic becomes a source of developing new sources of poetic strength; its function lies in using new metaphors for formal control. Prospero's world, thus destabilized, holds less significance in Namjoshi: "Two monsters are crawling out of my eyes / ... / Their function escapes me, / They have broken their claws. / Oh my pretty playthings, / My shining instruments!" (p. 94). Prospero's realisation is equally important. While Prospero represents the patriarchal world, Caliban and Miranda represent women of the third and first world countries. The existing boundary of feminisms is broken with the physical bond between Caliban and Miranda. The poem is highly political, and this is where lesbian feminism, radical in approach, reaches its zenith in Namjoshi. Namjoshi breaks the boundary of patriarchal and societal law in having built a physical relationship between Caliban and Miranda and in destabilizing the hidden nature of lesbian desire. That Prospero realises his control is lost becomes the genesis of a world of freedom—for women, lesbians and for all the alternative creation.

The concluding section of "Snapshots of Caliban" remains critical with respect to decolonization and the re-building of what is lost in the process of colonization. The master's inability to control the "colonized" subject is revealed in the last poem. Prospero's authority over the island is broken; the hierarchical relationship of Prospero-Ariel-Miranda-Caliban, though forced, is displaced. Prospero contemplates: "I made them? Maiden and monster / ... / Are they mine or their own? / I dare not claim them" (p. 102). The breaking of the claws is metaphorical in nature in terms of gaining control over one's own life. Miranda and Caliban are free to move away from the colonized island, and the return of Sycorax is formally announced with the idea of restructuring the modernist universe. Sycorax is back claiming: "Old women do not die easily, nor / Are their deaths timely. / ... / when Prospero / said he took over an uninhabited island / save for Caliban and the enslaved / Ariel, he lied. / I LIVED ON THAT ISLAND" (2006, p. 1; author's emphasis). Namjoshi's speaker, in this case Sycorax, is closely identified with Namjoshi, the author; and she turns outward, often surrendering herself to be shaped by and to speak for others. From the feelings of an isolated individual speaker, Sycorax plays the role of a guardian. While Caliban is busy jotting down, in her diary, the daily affairs on the island, Sycorax is busy fantasizing her own authority over the island.

In this collection of poems and fables too, like *Because of India*, the textual universe created remains women-centric, most animals representing female characters. The autobiographical finds a textual universe. Like *Because of India*, *Sycorax* also puts forward a similar theme of identifying the self with the animal world: “On this island though, I may dream again. On this island, where the earth is waiting to eat me up, I know very well—whether or not the birds and beasts acknowledge it—that I am one of them” (p. 3). Similar characters such as witches and giantesses command the lesbian themes of other collections of poems and fables as well. The empathetic lesbian witch represented in “The Wicked Witch” in *Feminist Fables*, Circe of “Homage to Circe” included in *The Jackass and the Lady* and the sea-like giantess of “The Return of the Giantess” anthologized in *The Blue Donkey Fables* provide a backdrop to the character of *Sycorax*. In *Sycorax*, moreover, the ‘highly egoistic’ self of Caliban is found in the characters of *Sycorax* and Ariel as well. *Sycorax*’s own understanding of Ariel is that of a gay man, eternally preoccupied with his own desire, and is free from any human bond or oppression. The postcolonial universe created is that of inflexible female and sexual liberation. *Sycorax* thinks: “I’ve decided that Ariel is a type of gay man, eternally preoccupied, and endlessly young. He could go away if he liked and look for company, but who would he find as beautiful as he? And who would I find as interesting as me? In consequence, we do not speak to each other” (p. 6). Placing such a narcissistic feeling in *Sycorax* has its use in framing the liberated world. It is political yet highly personal in Namjoshi. In “Letter to the Reader,” a forward to *Sycorax*, Namjoshi writes that, unlike *Because of India*, she is more concerned with finding proper texture for the composition of a good poem than the politics behind such a practice. The reason behind drafting many collections of poems in *Because of India* remains political: that owing to the positioning of a third world lesbian feminist poet it is desirable to create a textual universe than keeping ‘silence’ attached to heart. The reason behind drafting *Sycorax* is more personal than political. It is more about aging of the lesbian self and the political is personal which in turn becomes deeply cultural.

In short, in most of the poems and fables the nature and function of the traditional tales witness a transgression dramatically. Ancient fairy tales rewritten and fables composed provide an intersection between traditional image of the universe and the alternative world of lesbian women. Namjoshi’s reframing of lesbianism in this context provokes a significant debate about the status of lesbian identity in India—is it a natural life restricted in the poems, is it a political life aspired, is it a life in the state of immediacy, or is it a politically-mediated life? While reviewing Namjoshi’s alternative creation and the use of animal imagery, Ruth Vanita writes: “...animal tropes suggest crossings of the boundaries of race, gender, culture, nationality, and sexuality. Her beasts, with their capacity to transform themselves and to live at ease in more than one skin, are less containable than human beings already positioned in categories of nationality and gender” (2000, p. 282). Each animal or alternative character represented in Namjoshi stands aloof from the mainstream male character that we find in our everyday life. The poems and fables incorporate themes in the realm of a discourse where postcolonialism, feminism and queer theory merge to structure an alternative universe in textuality.

III

Namjoshi's rejection of grand narratives or the grand structure of male-centric universe / literature raises questions about the nature of the existing discourse: the rejection of the heterosexual universe, of the assumed heterosexual audience, of the constructed heterosexual academic pedagogy and of the so-called heterosexual literature. The rejection puts forward searching questions: What is it that queer literature has to achieve by restructuring the textual universe? What produces such intellectual fragmentations and presuppositions? Why all these aspects of attempting to restructure the law, religion, state and nation? Why all pronouncements that there has to be women-centric literatures, with a women's world and without the existence of men? Why should there be the death of philosophy, truth and the death of epistemology? Namjoshi's work institutes a discursive field of enquiry. Multidisciplinary, diasporic and transnational, Namjoshi's work voices across states and nations and across the disciplines of gender, sexuality and geopolitics. In recent years, her experimentation with children's literature has enriched the subject while taking the mission of creating a female-centred universe and in centring Aditi, a character similar to that of Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and this has evoked a sense of uniformity in restructuring the male-centric universe. In the image of both interdisciplinary and transnational feminist scholars, however, often neglected for the diasporic aspect of her sexual identity, Namjoshi's work has been highly ignored and has been set apart from the course syllabi. Her work moreover cuts across several academic disciplines and holds much significance in the field of gender, politics and queer studies. Hence in section we centralize lesbian gender modification as a site for investigating the limitations of agency in the heteronormative world. It considers the use of de-formed / re-formed figures in Namjoshi to destabilize the power agency such as the academia and numerous male-centric heterosexualized institutions. In interpreting the narrative of lesbian feminism, we analyse the animal imagery and image-changing as practices that not only challenge the existing norms of society, they also arouse a sense of fear in patriarchal psychosis.

In recent years, scholarships produced to explore different dimensions of Indian writing have encompassed a wide range of topics including poetics, gender, nationalism and postcolonialism as forms of acquiring uniqueness in terms of knowledge, status and power. Current debates on postcolonial (Indian) poetry are positioned in the fashion of establishing a Victorian moral discipline and can be summarized with a single phrase "universalized heterosexuality". As the case may be, postcolonial studies has received wide importance in the Indian classroom and is frequently debated in the Indian academia. Consequential argument is that of Ruth Vanita who claims that "...of all the schools of critical theory...postcolonial studies is the one that has been most eagerly embraced in the Indian academy and lesbian and gay studies the one most systematically avoided" (2000, p. 272). The term "postcolonial" has gained much importance among both 'orthodox Marxists' and 'traditional nationalists' and the teaching pedagogy centres on an assumed / perceived heterosexual teaching fraternity (p. 272). Notwithstanding the nature of the debate, postcolonial studies has gained much significance—though as a main-stream heterosexual discourse—and is positioned as a discursive field of enquiry in

Indian academia. Such assumptions in summarizing the body of texts produced in India not only sidelines Namjoshi's texts, it also delimits the scope of exploring the gendered structure of Indian society and Indian writing in English. Reviewing the published texts of Shobha De and Suniti Namjoshi, Vanita claims that it is because homophobic compromise that Shobha De's texts are prescribed in the syllabi and have gained wide significance where as owing to the nature of the sympathetic representation of lesbianism that Namjoshi's texts are sidelined to the maximum degree.⁸ Moreover, a surprising lack of teaching courses on Indian sexualities dominates the academia and, in particular, classroom teaching has been based on a presupposition of having a heterosexual audience.⁹

Hence the challenge faced by lesbian writers remains central to the discussion when we explore Namjoshi's writing. The extract from "In This Kind Country" takes such a perspective in de-framing the imaginary categories of gender and sexuality (read heterosexuality). While concluding her own position in the Eastern world, predetermined as a lesbian woman, Namjoshi contemplates:

And in mine, [my country, India]
The word is so raw it bleeds; and from
fury of pain, it attacks; and would
maim us daily. We can compose ourselves;
but it's our bodies, not our passports,
fit so uncommonly well. (1989, p. 122)

A reflection on the perceived polarity of the East and the West, the poem takes us to the realm of understanding Indian history and Indian society where the lesbian self can neither be named nor be imagined. Starting with an attempt to proclaim the diasporic self, Namjoshi divides the world into two broad categories: the East and the West, the geographical locations; heterosexual and homosexual, the sexual identity category; and white and people of colour, the racial identity, for an associated idea and theory. Namjoshi becomes more critical of India than the Western civilization in rejecting sexual identity categories and writes: "We loved those kindly gentlemen, I mean, / your own father, and your daughter's father. / But in our long ancestry / where are the women? / I know I should be proud, but I feel / like a beggar. Is my vast vanity wholly illegal" (1984, p. 15).

So in attempting to construct the image of women and centring them in the neo-universe, she examines the nature of such a discourse, and for its rationale, she creates mythical figures as lesbian women and traditional male-centric heroes as women /

⁸ See Maya Sharma's "Introduction" to *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (2006) for a discussion on how same-sex desire is absent within the framework of feminist discourse on female sexuality.

⁹ For a discussion on the politics of inclusion of homophobic texts in academic curricula, see Nikolai Andres's "Queering Our Classrooms" (2005, 131-139).

animals in her texts about which, in “Suniti Namjoshi: Diasporic, Lesbian Feminism and the Textual Politics of Transnationality,” Harveen S. Mann claims:

As Namjoshi crosses or erases borders – national, cultural, gender, and narratological – and proffers a transgressive, even subversive, commentary on mainstream traditions both Eastern and Western, she unsettles much on both sides. Failing – here construed as positive – to achieve any idealized sense of belonging to one (essentialized) culture, nation, or group, or, conversely, to arrive at (an even more problematic) “universal” state, Namjoshi occupies instead a “third space,” an interstitial location between nations and cultures, as theorized by Homi Bhabha... (1997, p. 98).

The third space, the in-between space, works at various levels of subjective-knowledge enquiry and a discursive field is created in Namjoshi’s work. Namjoshi, as a diasporic subject in the West, takes an ‘Asian perspective’; as an immigrant in the West, she develops an ‘alien perspective’; and as a ‘sexualized’ lesbian person, she explores a ‘lesbian perspective’. In practising all these dimensions in her writing, she deconstructs the male-centred spaces and sites: the West and East — the West for being a site for racial confrontation; and the East, India in particular, for being a permanent site for housing male-dominated (Hindu) ideology where the notion of lesbian identity hardly ever finds a place. Namjoshi, challenging gender, race and sexuality, takes an intermediary approach to bridge the gap, and in doing so she “unsettles much on both sides” (p.98). Mann quotes from Bhabha’s *Location of Culture* to illustrate the argument further. Theorizing the concepts of hybridity and the creation of the third space, Bhabha claims that the “productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance” and it is a way of exploring an “alien territory” [textual / terrestrial space] that “may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (1994, pp. 37-38). Namjoshi’s writing fits into a discourse which constructs an alien territory, and imaging / imagining different facets of lesbian desire it provides ample space for ‘women’s emancipation’.¹⁰ The construction of the third space is crucial to the understanding of the themes projected in Namjoshi as well. From resigning from the prestigious IAS job to being a teacher and writer, from writing postcolonial queer poetry to children’s literature, and from her interest in mathematics to that of myth—all aspects of the self hold importance in contributing to the construction of the alternative space.

Hence, the field of enquiry does not become why women, lesbians, birds and beasts are constructed, structured or repressed in the male-dominated universe, rather as Merchant argues, Namjoshi finds an alternative way in creating a new world order — a new space — by snatching away power, and thereby she creates a new world of women,

¹⁰ For further details, see Emma Goldman’s “The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation” in *Ethics: A Feminist Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Frazer, Jennifer Hornsby & Sabina Lovibond. Blackwell: Oxford, 1992, pp. 151-159.

lesbian, beasts and birds. This in turn centralizes women in the humanist universe. From the abounding and romantic depiction of lesbian bond — “When I went to sleep / with my arms about her, / it was like falling asleep on a green hill” (1984, p. 16) — to the poetic representation of racism — “the nations are merging / black, red, brown, white, /... / like spinning confetti / on carnival day” (1971, p. 10), Namjoshi’s understanding of the world-order fits into the creation of the third space. Not only does it disfigure the patriarchal bond, it also submerges itself with the new world order in terms of identifying the feminist / lesbian self with numerous alternative creations.

In Namjoshi, the visibility of a theory-literature interface continues to hold ample significance with the publication of *The Jackass and the Lady*. With the emergence of several sociological and literary theories in the western world — based on gender, race and sexuality, and away from the main-stream traditional art, literature and poetics — Namjoshi’s literary work has been highly influenced by thinkers such as Kate Millett and Adrienne Rich. Lesbianism was still a taboo in the West in the mid-70s and what followed was a mode of highly political writing for the emancipation of women’s problem. The reworking on ancient fables, poems and on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is a product of literary and sociological movements such as feminism and postcolonialism and the gay liberation movement. Accepted notions regarding subjects, sexes, personal spaces and narratives were thus violated in literature to bring in the writer and the reader a sense of transformation, relief, education and atonement and self-realisation. Namjoshi’s work thus re-categorises the connections between ethnicity and sexuality. Personal facts about lesbianism and bitter enactment of a racial self in the Western world provide Namjoshi a quest to develop such perspectives. These facts do not however come without a fortified ground of subjugation. The counter site constructed in Namjoshi remains operative in other collections of poems as well. Everywhere it is with a purpose — often political — that Namjoshi creates the alternative site for the representation of women and for their liberation from the hegemonic world order. What is represented here is the work on the site that is literally indicative of social productiveness.

Writing concerning postcolonial sexualities has come a long way and Namjoshi’s place is unique in this field of studies. In reconstructing what is lost in the process of colonialism and in reorganising the structure of the humanist universe, Namjoshi’s initiative has been to create an alternative universe in textuality. She has justified valid reasons to ensure that the structure of the perceived universe is not for the alternative categories of people and it is mostly ‘heterosexual’ and ‘male-centric’. Reordering it structurally, here literally in textuality and figuratively in terms of cultural materialism, has to be in the form of a mission. Placing Namjoshi’s work in the academic curricula and in anthologies of postcolonial studies would not only centralise Namjoshi’s work, it will also strengthen the field of knowledge enquiry on gender and sexualities. Namjoshi’s voluminous work is an indicator of the process of making the up-side down — being highly subversive and constructive — and it marks the beginning of a new structure of women-centric society that resists the existing power structure of male-centric society. With a resistance of law, Indian religion (Hinduism), social structures and with the

subversion of myth, stories and narratives, Namjoshi's mission positions the lesbian self central to alterity studies.

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